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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/15/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: WOMEN'S NGO URGES US ACTION ON FREEDOM DEFICIT,  
OTHER REGIONAL CHALLENGES

REF: A. TUNIS 839

[B](#). 06 TUNIS 1421  
[C](#). 06 TUNIS 388

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) AND (d)

[1](#). (C) Summary: During the Ambassador's July 11 courtesy call on the independent Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), Executive Board members outlined challenges for independent civil society and urged the USG to take greater steps to promote freedom of expression and association. The group criticized US policies in the region, warning that the situation in Iraq and the Palestinian territories engender hatred and violence. They also expressed their concern that such sentiments fuel extremism, which could threaten women's rights in Tunisia. The Ambassador underscored strong US support for democracy in Tunisia (the Freedom Agenda) and explained US policies in the region. End Summary.

[2](#). (C) After providing an overview of ATFD activities to promote women's rights and gender equality, ATFD President (and recipient of the Secretary's 2007 Woman of Courage Award) Khediya Cherif told the Ambassador that the GOT has interfered with ATFD activities for several years, including blocking ATFD funding, preventing it from renting public spaces and intimidating members (Refs B and C). Cherif said that the GOT limits freedom of expression and association for independent civil society, specifically those that do not follow the GOT line. While the GOT touts the existence of almost 10,000 associations, Cherif said less than ten deserve the title of non-governmental organizations. When the Ambassador noted that there is a lack of democracy and human rights in Tunisia, the group chimed in, "An absence!" ATFD Vice President Hafidha Chkeir asked why the United States supports the Tunisian regime which is "anti-democratic." The Ambassador added that he, the Embassy and the US Government support democracy and democrats in Tunisia and around the world (the Freedom Agenda), and provided the group with a copy of President Bush's Prague speech.

[3](#). (C) The Ambassador asked the group for specific ways the USG could support their efforts to promote democracy and freedom in Tunisia. Chkeir asked that the United States (and the European Union) continue to lobby for democracy, human rights and women's rights. Cherif added that the State Department's Human Rights Report is one of the best reports on the Tunisian situation. But, at times, Cherif said, it feels like Western governments are engaging in double speak when it comes to support for the Ben Ali regime. Specifically, the United States should denounce violations, pressure the GOT to allow greater freedom of expression and association, and ensure Tunisia holds free elections with international observers.

¶4. (C) The Executive Board members then turned to US policy in the Middle East and expressed their concern that US support for Israel is a "catastrophe" for the region and led to the emergence of Hamas. The Ambassador said the United States is committed to a solution, but that Palestinians must reject violence and accept the existence of Israel. Cherif noted that the situation in the Palestinian territories destabilizes the whole region and encourages extremists. In an informal ATFD poll, Cherif said that, while some female university students veiled to protest the lack of domestic political space, others were reacting to international policies. Board members added that the war in Iraq also fuels anti-American and extremist tendencies. Several noted concern that if free elections were held in Tunisia, Islamists would win and reverse the advancements of women's rights.

¶5. (C) COMMENT. Like many Tunisian intellectuals, ATFD membership is increasingly concerned with growing extremism in Tunisia and the region. Vehemently secular, the ATFD shares many of the GOT's political and social concerns, although that has not led to unfettered activity. While Ben Ali's recent monetary gift to the organization was a step in the right direction, the following week an ATFD event was banned. Despite the challenges, the group's leadership remains active and welcomed the Ambassador's visit as evidence of USG support for civil society. END COMMENT.  
GODEC